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FM AMCONSUL MELBOURNE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4887
INFO RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC
RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHINGTON DC
RUEHC/DEPT OF INTERIOR WASHINGTON DC
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHINGTON DC
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 3548
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 0111
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY 2062
RUEHPT/AMCONSUL PERTH 1535

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MELBOURNE 000031

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

Department for CA/OCS/ACS/EAP, White House for NSC Bader

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAID](#) [SENV](#) [CASC](#) [AS](#)

SUBJECT: DEPLOYMENT OF U.S. FIRE EXPERTS GENERATES GOODWILL

Ref: A) Melbourne 28, B) Melbourne 25, C) Melbourne 24, D) Melbourne 23, E) Melbourne 21, F) Melbourne 20, G) Melbourne 17, H) Canberra 134, I) Canberra 100

Summary

1. (SBU) The deployment of 60 U.S. wildfire experts to Victoria has been well received by locals as well as the media. U.S. firefighters are deployed in four locations throughout the state as five major fires continue to burn, though none of the fires present an immediate threat to lives or property. Confirmed dead for the February 7 blazes has reached 208; unlike earlier estimates which ranged as high as 300, officials now believe that the death toll will not rise much further. Post has no report of U.S. citizens injured or killed. While the fires have been burning for nearly two weeks, the emotional impact of Australia's deadliest natural disaster is still fresh for many in Victoria. Charge and Consul General will attend the national day of mourning ceremony in Melbourne on February 22. End Summary.

U.S. Personnel Deployment

2. (SBU) U.S. wildfire personnel deployed to Australia on February 15 to assist Victorian emergency crews have reached the field. Post continues to receive positive feedback from locals on the deployment including letters of thanks. Victoria's daily newspaper The Age reported that U.S. and New Zealand crews are helping to protect vital water catchment areas as well as assisting in the identification of fire victims. Under normal circumstances, the arrival of 60 U.S. firefighters could have been front page news, but given the overwhelming amount of local news surrounding the fires and the many stories of human tragedy, the coverage was relatively impressive.

3. (SBU) Lead USG/Australia firefighting liaison, Bodie Shaw (Deputy Director of the NIFC -- National Interagency Fire Center, Bureau of Indian Affairs) provided the following breakdown of the 60 personnel presently in the field:

-- Alexandra (55 miles northeast of Melbourne): Five personnel including information, operations, planning and fire behavior officers.

-- Churchill (80 miles southeast of Melbourne and the site of one of five major ongoing fires): 13 burned area recovery personnel including geologists, soil and mapping experts.

-- Ovens (130 miles northeast of Melbourne): 13 burned area recovery

personnel including mapping and soil experts, a hydrologist and a biologist.

-- Melbourne: Three emergency liaison officers at Victoria's Emergency Coordination Center.

-- Woori Yallock (30 miles east of Melbourne): 26 task force personnel assisting with fire suppression on one of Melbourne's water catchment areas.

Fire Update

¶4. (SBU) According to a Victoria fire situation report, 11 fires, five of which are considered "significant," are burning across 286,630 hectares (708,278 acres) of the state. The death toll from the February 7 blazes has reached 208 and police officials now believe that it will not rise much further. The revised number of dead includes a Canberra firefighter deployed to Victoria who was killed by a falling tree branch on February 17. The fires have destroyed 1834 private dwellings, 1074 agricultural buildings/facilities, and 103 state/community pieces of infrastructure. Donations to the Red Cross and the Salvation Army have reached A\$150 million (US\$96.4 million). Relief centers for displaced persons were reportedly empty for the first time on the night of February 19. As of 4:00 PM local time on February 19, the following resources were deployed across Victoria:

-- U.S.: 60 personnel
-- Canada: 10 personnel
-- New Zealand: 51 personnel

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-- Victoria: 2,969 personnel
-- New South Wales: 694 personnel
-- Tasmania: 98 personnel
-- South Australia: 114 personnel
-- Western Australia: 8
-- Australian Capital Territory: 90 personnel

American Citizens

¶5. (SBU) As of 4:30 PM local time, post had no report of U.S. citizens injured or killed in the fires. We have also verified the well-being of all welfare and whereabouts (W&W) requests, and have not received any other requests for consular services. Post will report any developments to Consular Affairs if new cases arise.

Comment

¶6. (SBU) Although charitable donations continue to flow in and the thousands of people displaced by Australia's deadliest natural disaster have found at least temporary lodging, Victoria is still coping with the emotional impact of the wild fires. CDA and Consul General will attend the national day of mourning ceremonies on February 22 in Melbourne. With five major fires still burning in the state, Victoria has not yet begun to assess the total cost of the fires, but many fear that the longest term damage will be to Melbourne's already fragile water supply.

THURSTON